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Long Distance

A Short Short Story by
COREY FORD

THE telephone rings. On the window sill beside the telephone is a single geranium in a cracked pot. The smudged pane looks out upon a yellow brick wall. The walls of the room are sea-green, and are streaked with dampness; the floor is bare. A wicker basket of clean laundry rests on the ironing board; on the stove is a large boiler filled with clothes. The kitchen clock clicks emptily.

The telephone rings again.

A child wakes in the crib beneath the window and whimpers. The sink is piled with breakfast dishes. The kitchen table has been cleared. A pen leans at a crazy angle from the top of an open ink bottle, and on the top line of a tablet of ruled paper has been written: "New York, N. Y., December 25th . . ."

The telephone rings again.

The door flings open, and a large woman, the base of her neck beaded with perspiration, shambles across the room, wiping her hands on her apron. She lifts the receiver.

"... Yeah? No, she ain't here. No. Whosiss? What? . . . I can't hear. . . . Oh! Well, wait a minute then, maybe I can find her. I think she went up on the roof to hang out some . . . What? I said, wait a minute, I'll call her."

The woman sets down the receiver, shuffles to the door,

Illustrated
by
JEFF
TESTER

turns her face upward, and shouts through the criss-cross of stairs and banisters: "Missus Ran-dall! Missus Randall! Oh, Missus Ran-dall! . . . Is Mrs. Randall up there, Mrs. Elder? Tell her there's a long-distance telephone, and to hurry."

She recrosses the room, pauses to remark into the telephone: "She's com-in'" and then bends down and peers into the crib.

"Cudgie, cudgie, cudgie . . . poor little kid. . . ." She sniffs the air suddenly. "Say, you tell your ma"—stepping briskly to the stove—"if she don't watch this stew, you two won't have no Christmas dinner." She sets the pot back on the stove, and ambles slowly toward the door. There is a loud descending clatter on the stairs.

"Hurry up, Mrs. Randall . . . long distance. Maybe it's news about—"

MRS. RANDALL hurries past her breathlessly toward the telephone. She is very young and very thin, and her gingham dress is not very new. For the moment a spot of bright color is spreading slowly over each cheek, like a drop of red paint in water, and her dark eyes are black with excitement. She makes a foolish dab to straighten her wind-blown hair, and grabs the receiver.

"Hello. Thanks, Mrs. Mullaney. . . . Hello. Hello. Hello." She clicks the receiver. "He . . . yes, hello, yes, this is she. Yes, this is Mrs. Joseph Randall speaking. . . . What? From where? . . . Toledo? Oh, my God."

She has just time to brace herself against the window sill.

"Hello. Hello. Hellooo-oo-ooo, Ma! Well, Ma . . ."

The color has gone out of her cheeks again, leaving them now very empty. She grasps the telephone until her knuckles show white.

" . . . And the same to you, Ma, an' many of them. Gee, though, but think of you calling up all the way from Toledo to just say Merry Christmas. Gee, isn't it awful expensive? . . . Is that all? Oh, yeah, but how much for each additional minute? Yeh; well, there you are, you see, there's where they get you. . . . What? Oh, we're—we're fine. Wait a minute till I shut this door, Ma; there's a lot of noise. . . ."

She turns and faces Mrs. Mullaney, still lingering curiously on the threshold. Mrs. Mullaney recollects herself guiltily, then gathers in her chins with wounded dignity, and slams the door behind her like a lady.

"There. . . . Oh, everybody's fine, I said. Yeh, an' the kid too; honest, Ma, you ought to see the kid. Honest, he's the *image* of his father! Six weeks. Say, he's the cutest—what? Oh, Jo's—Jo just stepped out a minute, Ma. He just went down to the corner to buy me some"—her eye falls on the geranium—"some flowers. Jo's always getting me flowers and things. You ought to

see the *marvelous* fur coat he gave me for Christmas, and a new silk dress—I got it on now. He's always giving me jewelry and everything; I tell him he'll spoil me sure. . . . Ha. . . .

"Well, an' it's great to hear *your* voice too, Ma. It wouldn't seem like Christmas without . . . Let's see, it's been just a—a year, hasn't it? Just a year to the day. . . . Say, Ma—not that I care, but—how does Pa feel about me, now? . . . He still does, eh? All right. . . . No, that's all right; I don't blame him . . . in a way. He always *was* like that. Yeh, well, you tell him how *happy* I am, see, Ma, an' what a nice apartment we got, an' how good Jo is to me an' the—the kid . . . an' . . .

"Yeh, we're still at the same address; we like it so here we don't want to move. You and Pa ought to see this apartment, Ma, honestly, you wouldn't believe it. Eight rooms, and elevators, and my boudoir is all in pink and white—like I always wanted, remember? How I always wanted a sunken bathtub, like the movies, and some old armor and an electric ice box? Well, tell Pa I got all that, an' more, and of course we got two servants, because Jo won't *hear* my doing any housework. . . . Yeh, at Clancey Street. That's just off Fifth Avenue. . . .

"Yeh. Yeh, I know. Sure, I know. Do you have the tree this year as usual? Fine. . . . And, say, I bet you're having the regulation old Christmas feed, huh, like we used to have? . . . Turkey and all, huh? . . . I wish I could smell over the telephone, ha, ha. . . . Oh, yes, Jo and I are going to have ours right here quietly at home. Jo wanted me to go out to some swell restaurant or other, but I said, 'Oh, no, Jo,' I said, 'Christmas is one day when everybody ought to—to stay home an' . . .'

"Nothing, Ma. I just coughed.

"Gee, we must have talked way over our three minutes? . . . Yeh, it only comes but once a year, doesn't it? . . .

"Wait a minute, Ma, before you hang up. I want you to say 'Hello' to little Joey . . . wait till I hold him up. . . .

"Here, Joey, that's your grandma. . . . Hello, Grandma. . . .

"Isn't he sweet, Ma? . . . Well, it was just great to hear from you. . . . No, I—I don't think I'll be seeing you for—for quite a while. . . . No. . . . Well, Ma, yes, I will . . . yeh. . . . Ma . . . yeh, and a—happy New Year. . . . Good-by—"

She stares at the mouthpiece of the telephone for several minutes after she has hung up the receiver. She sets it down at last and walks dully toward the kitchen table. She sinks down on a wooden chair and stares at the tablet of ruled paper. Her hand reaches out slowly toward the pen.

New York, N. Y., December 25th.
Dear Jo:

If this note ever reaches you, this is only to say I and Joey are both well; we both forgive you. If you want to ever come back, we are still at the same address and join in wishing you a—

She stops writing and stares at the paper again.